

Introduction

Neoliberal turns in higher education

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New grounds for learning and teaching: recent trends

Over the past decades, higher education has been profoundly restructured across the world. With remarkable consistency educational reforms have been put forward that rest on a particular and similar rationale: to achieve global competitiveness and adapt to the advent of the so-called 'knowledge economy'. The ramifications for universities have been dramatic: institutions have changed, roles of students and university employees have been re-defined and the concept of knowledge itself altered.

Influential theorists have identified a new so-called 'mode 2' of knowledge production. In traditional 'mode 1', knowledge production and intellectual pursuits were defined by hierarchically organised, slowly changing institutions and their disciplines' search for truth. In 'mode 2', which is on a par with the *Zeitgeist* of a new global knowledge economy, knowledge is instead geared towards solutions to 'real-world' problems solved by trans-disciplinary networks involving stakeholders outside academia, organised in 'non-hierarchical, heterogeneously organized forms which are essentially transient' (Gibbons Nowotny and Limoges, 1994: vii). Under the neoliberal ideology the preferred stakeholders are likely to be corporations – as universities themselves are also increasingly organised as private companies and have their ideological justifications recast in terms of commodification and corporatisation, with a focus on efficiency and a stress on research that can be converted into a revenue stream (Shore 2010: 16).



At the institutional level, the changes include an increase in contingent and part-time faculty (Posecznick 2014: 2); an increase in managerial personnel and an ubiquitous obsession with measurement and rankings to secure 'quality' through rendering performance comparable (Tuchman 2009; Shore and Wright 2000). Indeed, the efforts to turn universities into competitive brands in the global market have led to the proliferation of 'communication departments' and still larger chunks of university budgets being spent on publicity as one university's increased spending on marketing effectively forces other universities to follow suit to keep their market share. Paradoxically, such efforts to achieve excellence and stand out from their competitors by adopting the latest 'best practices' have led to increasing conformity. As Gaye Tuchman has pointed out, such efforts to brand universities as 'unique' to attract the best students bring about uniformity rather than diversity as: 'these microscopic variations between brands produce distinction without difference' (Tuchman 2009: 48). Indeed, what we are observing is an ongoing process of isomorphism, entailing imitation and 'harmonization' of the processes or structures of one organisation to those of another (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

'Flexibility' seems to be the universal yet imprecise recipe for survival and growth in the turbulent educational knowledge economy: to cater to the shifting needs of the labour market and to provide more choice to the individual student, university education has been modularised. Such modularisation offers students the freedom and possibility to *customise* their own education, but at the same time it puts greater responsibility on each student to establish progression and consistency – a progress and coherence that was previously 'guaranteed' by the disciplines. In these policies of higher education reform, the primary task of the university is no longer to lead the students to search for truth, to stimulate curiosity, make them wrestle with intellectual possibilities, appreciate art and culture and work towards an enlightened politics and public service. Rather, their primary obligation is to prepare students for the job market, that is, to make them 'employable'. Employability, understood as the capacity to get and keep employment, has become an important performance indicator in higher education, as 'a socially decontextualized signifier' (Morley 2001: 131).

These changes also affect the way learning is understood: they have led to the promotion of particular pedagogies and transformed the way students (from bachelor to PhD level) are relating to the university. We are thus seeing the emergence of novel ways for individuals to engage with larger



structures of regulations, conditions and provisos. New modes of learning are coming into being that also reflect new ways of conceiving, and constructing, the individual.

Individualisation, individuation and the neoliberal turn in higher education

If flexibilisation is perceived as a universal, yet imprecise recipe for survival in the dynamic knowledge economy, it rests heavily on a continued process of individualisation. In general terms, individualisation is a process by which the identity of human beings is made an object of reflexivity and intervention. Identity is, so to speak, transformed from a 'given' into a 'task', or a point of intervention. Individuals are then encouraged to take responsibility for this task (cf. Bauman 2000: 31f.; Dawson 2012: 307). In the process, individuals are removed from collective categorisations and faced with having to 'make themselves up'. In Giddens' (1991: 75) words, 'we are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves'. With respect to higher education and learning, we may analogously say that 'we are not what we are, but what we make of our learning experiences'. Contemporary higher education policies thus emphasise the active role of the individual in fashioning himself or herself by way of engagement in continued learning.

A significant aspect of this development is that responsibility for managing one's life, and hence one's learning trajectory, is increasingly placed on individuals. Contemporary higher education expects individuals to construct their own learning portfolios and thus their own biographies. However, as pointed out by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2005: 4), 'do-it-yourself biographies' are always also 'risk-biographies', and: '[i]f they are not to fail individuals must be able to plan for the long-term and adapt to changes; they must organize and improvise, set goals and recognize obstacles, accept defeats and make new starts. They need initiative, tenacity, flexibility and tolerance of frustration'. This also means, however, that individuals are encouraged to 'seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2005: xxii). The educational landscape is replete with unforeseen challenges, contradictions and rewards, but dealing with these is largely an individual affair, left in the hands of each student.

With respect to organisations, individualisation goes hand in hand with the deployment of a certain kind of organisational rationality, implying that different kinds of authorities understand their powers and obligations in

terms of relatively formalised doctrines of rule which make it legitimate for them to exercise a calculated power over the conduct of both groups and individuals (cf. Rose 1999). New diagrams of control are being put into place and implemented, exemplified, for example, by bibliometric systems of performance appraisal and keeping account of academic citations. Such measures (pun intended) involve a constant and never-ending modulation of human conduct. This modulation occurs in an open network of circuits between the individual and the practices in which s/he is involved (Rose 1999: 234). It is exercised, for example, through the practices of continuous training, lifelong learning, perpetual assessment, continual incitement to improve oneself, constant monitoring of health and never-ending risk management.

Individualisation is, at least in many of its articulations, closely linked to a neoliberal ethos of governance. In a general sense, neoliberalism can be conceived as a cluster of ideas that point towards a certain way of organising society, emphasising the individual as the basic constitutive active agent in the construction of his or her fate and of society-at-large. In this process, a new set of politically infused ideals has been articulated. The neoliberal ethos promotes entrepreneurship, flexibility, voluntary forms of regulation, top-down forms of transparency and formalised types of accountability. And not least, it rests on the notion of the agentic individual being the basic entity through which social change and development takes place. The celebration of individual best performance, excellence, student talent and star academics illustrate the heavy emphasis placed on individual agency in present-day higher education.

In this sense, current transformations in higher education policy are reinforcing a trend towards a specific kind of individuation-as-individualisation, which is discernible across several policy areas in large parts of the world, and not least in Western Europe. Understood in the broad sense, 'individuation' denotes the process by which individuals become differentiated from one another. As pointed out by Deleuze, the process involves not only an increased awareness of the distinctive properties of the unique individual per se, but also of the position of the individual in the wider structure of relations in which he or she is embedded (Parr 2010: 194). The individual learns to appreciate herself or himself as a distinct person with specific characteristics, and as one who is in some respects dependent on other individuals, groups and institutions. In other words, it involves a recognition of intrinsic



as well as extrinsic dimensions and an appreciation of broader constellations of relationships.

Individualisation, on the other hand, involves structural and organisational changes, which have led Beck and Beck-Gernsheim to speak of 'institutionalized individualism' (2005). Along this line of thought, individualisation is entrenched in all spheres of society, including the organisation of the welfare state and higher education.¹ Individualisation has implications for the shape of the social contract and social citizenship, and for the division of risk between the state, corporations, families and individuals. It also carries implications for learning, and for the distribution of the responsibilities and risks involved among agencies and individuals. Late modern individualisation is, in their view, 'non-linear' and 'open-ended', therefore 'the individual is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction for the first time in history' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: xxii).

The stress placed on the single individual in present policy change suggests, it would seem, that we are witnessing a uni-directional movement towards the disintegration of collectivity in various forms. However, individualisation is – somewhat paradoxically – a collective project. It is difficult, if not impossible, to speak of individualisation as only involving changes in the manner of acting and thinking of individuals. The collective dimension of individualisation also makes us aware of the simultaneous forms of *standardisation* that are taking place, as evinced in the mainstreaming and 'harmonisation' of grading systems, performance appraisals and pedagogical approaches. In fact, we contend, it is one of the striking features of individualisation that, as it occurs in the realm of higher education and in related policy areas, it proceeds as a simultaneous differentiation of the single, agentic individual, and the putting in place of standardising and collectivising audit procedures.

The assessment gaze

Academic worlds are ripe with examples of the significance of an 'audit culture' (Strathern 2000b). Students and teachers alike learn to think in terms of valuation and evaluation, to reflect on their performance in relation to themselves and others. They learn to make themselves auditable, and to facilitate the assessment of individual and collective performance. Surely, assessment of knowledge acquisition, of progress, of the solidity of truth-

claims, and of degrees of innovation has always occupied a central place in academic life. Over the last few decades, however, the forms of assessment and evaluation have changed quite dramatically in both form and content. Moreover, they have come to appear as natural ingredients in the management of academic institutions, and as part and parcel of the reflexive make-up of individuals.

Neoliberal policy and forms of governance build to a large extent on the assumption that what is valued can also be made visible, measured and compared. Transparency, in its contemporary understanding, is deeply entangled with flexible, neoliberal forms of governance and with New Public Management practices (Garsten and Jacobsson 2013). The notion of 'audit culture' itself captures the subtle but coercive forms of control and oversight, resting on transparency and measurability that allows for continued auditing of people, processes and performances (Shore and Wright 2000; Strathern 2000a). In organisational practices, rules and policies are likely to appear more rational if they are transparent than if they are opaque. Increasingly, learning objectives, grading policies, and other rules and norms are made more easily accessible and transparent to students and other interested parties. What may have been seen as subjective, experience-based, dialogic and in other ways less tangible or incommensurate procedures for evaluating performance are now replaced by what appears as impersonal, objective, and transparent criteria and evaluation processes.

This transparency also implies ever more subtle ways of 'seeing' the student. Today's higher education policy depends to a large extent on technologies for making the student and the teacher transparent to the system or, as Scott would have put it, 'legible'. In Scott's (1998) view, state-crafting, the large-scale social engineering characteristic of modernity, relies on technologies of legibility, on arranging the population in ways that simplify the classic state functions of taxation and conscription. The legibility of citizens, communities and corporations provides the very conditions for large-scale social engineering and hence for policy to be realised. Likewise, one of the prerogatives of contemporary organisations in higher education is making the world hospitable for translocal, universal forms of administration and governance, and this entails making individuals and their capabilities, skills and performances, legible and transparent.

With respect to education, the responsabilisation of individual students relies on making legible their capacities and competences. When capabilities and competences are readable and visible, they can also be attributed to a



specific individual, who can then be made responsible, and accountable, for them. Writing a competitive curriculum vitae is an obvious and significant way of making legible one's skills and competences (Fogde 2009). The range of available diplomas, certifications and other signs of achieved learning goals, are other examples of skills and competences made legible. Furthermore, legibility allows for the follow-up of actions, for verification, control and for sanctioning or reward.

It is partly through the routinisation of practices of legibility, transparency and evaluation that contemporary forms of governance and power function: 'The process of normalization lies at the heart of how modern power operates: the 'normalizing gaze ... establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them' (Foucault 1979: 184). The 'technologies of self', namely the devices used to encourage the individual to evaluate, monitor and improve the self that are mobilised in particular ways to shape how individuals perceive and conduct themselves (Foucault 1994), are also normalising in their effects. Evaluation practices contribute to establish normalcy standards. Evaluations do not just objectively measure existing qualities – they also signal what is desirable, and thus help in shaping the subjectivity of the individual being evaluated.

Moulding subjectivities

The rise of 'academic management', together with political concerns about the exchange and use value of higher education, have produced new organisational cultures, new student and professional priorities. Higher education institutions thus contribute to the moulding of new subjectivities. When we use the notion of the 'subject' we lean on the understanding of the concept as it has been defined by Michel Foucault. Foucault famously played on the double entendre of the word 'subject' to point to the ambiguous way in which modern forms of power work through freedom. A person can be 'subject to someone else by control or dependence, and tied to his own identity or self-knowledge' (Foucault 1982: 213); the first sense of the word positioning people as *objects* of power, and the second as *agents* of power. The articles of this volume show how things beyond particular curricula and specific teachers form student futures: they all demonstrate how students' lives and experiences are partly shaped by factors beyond classroom and course readings. The students are 'subject to' particular understandings and ideas

of what the purpose of higher education should be, and these ideas define university policies and institutional frameworks at the level of the national state – and beyond.

Above many policy initiatives roam strongly the concept of a competitive ‘global knowledge economy’. The idea of such an economy has become a general legitimising *leitmotif* around which concrete educational policies evolve (Wright and Rabo 2010). The term ‘knowledge economy’ points to a particular way that the knowledge-power nexus is played out in contemporary society by indicating the link between education and economy. As educational researcher Stephen Ball (2013), among others, has pointed out, economy plays an overwhelming role in attempts to reform and re-form education: the idea of international economic competition creates a ‘necessarian logic’ whereby public sectors must be reformed in a particular way to ‘respond to the exigencies of globalisation’ (Ball 2013: 18). In the context of such reforms education is generally understood as a producer of labour skills as a response to the requirements of global economic competition.

The term ‘knowledge economy’ itself is commonly assumed to be the brainchild of Austrian-American Business guru and management researcher Peter Drucker (1909-2005). In his book *The Effective Executive* (1967) Drucker claimed that the world has moved from ‘an economy of goods’ to a ‘knowledge economy’. His idea was that knowledge had replaced energy and capital as the most important value-generating resources, just as the latter had replaced land and labour in the nineteenth century. Consequently, a country’s raw material is really its educated workforce; and managers have to learn how to engage the minds rather than just control the hands of their workers. Challenging Taylorist stopwatch strategies, Drucker wrote that ‘the knowledge worker cannot be supervised closely or in detail. He can only be helped. But he must direct himself toward performance and contribution’ (Drucker 2002: 4). Such ideas clearly resonate with subtle and indirect contemporary forms of control identified by Foucault in his analysis of ‘governmentality’ (Foucault 1982).

Drucker (1986) is also father to a different, but similarly influential concept: management by objectives. The idea is that management and employees jointly define objectives within an organisation so that everybody has a clear understanding of them. Such a notion of management is efficient because it renders superfluous any direct supervision. A crucial part of



management by objectives is to establish systems that allow each member's contribution to be measured and assessed. Drucker's management concepts similarly resemble the indirect but powerful strategies governing the new public management reforms that has been described above. In their analysis of higher education reform, anthropologists Sue Wright and Annika Rabo (2010: 4) thus point out that OECD's recommendations for how public organisations should be adequately managed resemble private organisations. For instance, the OECD suggests 'contract steering' (resembling Drucker's management by objectives) as an efficient mode of governance: 'the OECD recommends ministers should stop rowing bureaucracies and start steering service provision. The idea is that the Minister and politicians focus their energies on setting the political aims and budget for a service sector' (Wright and Rabo 2010: 5).

The ways in which the OECD is able to influence education policy through these links are subtle, but very persuasive (Ball 2013: 31–35). Without any executive power, the OECD collects, collates and compares types of information considered relevant to educational governance across its member states. OECD provides the types of 'hard data' necessary to justify educational policies, reconciling them with precedents and comparisons, in ways that carry the values of a numerical rationality.

Neoliberal models of education reform also promote a particular idea of the individual as a self-reliant autonomous person who will try to optimise their value on the labour market and exercise their freedom and choose in ways that are self-actualising and self-fulfilling. Such an 'enterprising subject' is 'a self that calculates about itself and works upon itself in order to better itself' (Du Gay 1996: 101).

The notion of the 'subject' implies policies and governmental projects are not simply realised in the sites they affect. As Nikolas Rose points out, 'alignments are forged between the objectives of authorities wishing to govern and the personal projects of those organizations, groups and individuals who are the subject of government' (Rose 1999: 48). On the other hand, as the articles in this issue clearly demonstrate, the integration or 'alignment' between the policy and the subject is not a smooth and seamless one. Neoliberal 'governmentalities' are not just internalised. Instead, the process is full of contradictions, dilemmas, doubt, recalcitrance and resistance on the part of the subjects themselves. Consequently, contestation of the reforms leads to the shaping of diverse and contradictory spaces and subjectivities.

The contributions

This issue explores from various perspectives the way student futures at different levels of university education are affected by policy changes. The contributions describe the policy environment and the way university reforms shape student futures by pointing to particular ideal roles and necessitating certain attitudes and practices. However, the articles do not just point out the implied subject positions of such policies; but they take into account the actual experience and practices of teachers and students.

Paulina Mihailova looks at the regulation and standardisation of university pedagogies as part of the policy changes set off by the Bologna process. She investigates a compulsory trans-disciplinary, teacher-training programme offered at Stockholm University. The article explores how the university lecturers conceive of the effects of standardised and formalised training on their teaching. The content of the programme is defined by John Biggs's influential book *Teaching for Quality Learning* (2003). Mihailova analyses how the course becomes a site of contestation, where the university teachers' values of disciplinary expertise and academic freedom clash with university management's focus on accountability, efficiency and measurement. The study looks at the strong resentment evoked among academics, when everyone is required to adopt the same pedagogic philosophy, embrace the language of 'structural alignment' and 'learning outcomes', and take on the underlying idea of a 'one-size-fits-all' teaching concept – and the restricted and narrow understanding of 'quality' implied.

The empirical base of the analysis by Ellen Bal, Erella Grassiani and Kate Kirk is a Dutch liberal arts college. The article shows that this environment, where one might assume Humboldtian ideals to dominate, has in fact turned neoliberal: the college is a prestigious one and connotes generic elitism. However, it is not attended by students who want to pursue their intellectual curiosity, but rather by students who want success rather than enlightenment, and who tend to view 'Grades and diplomas [...] as ends in themselves, and not simply a reflection on the learning done'. The authors point to the growing mental health problems of students and attribute them to an unbalanced self-image where students are invited to judge themselves in the bi-polar distinction between 'success' and 'failure'. In such individualist, competitive environment the celebrated values of flexibility and freedom are not likely to be experienced as liberation, but rather exacerbate feelings of insecurity.



It is apparent from David Mills and Julia Paulson's research into British doctoral education that such experiences of vulnerability are present among PhD students too. The reforms of doctoral education policy in Britain and beyond aim at making the doctorate more regulated and supported. Mills and Paulson are careful to emphasise that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Contrary to much current literature, however, they are keen to emphasise that success and failure is not only contingent upon the agency of the individual student and their ability to nurture academic relationships. Instead, they point out how the students find themselves in difficult structural positions. On the one hand the regulation of PhD education means that the PhD candidates are obliged to attend courses to attain general academic or 'transferable' skills. On the other hand it has become increasingly common that students are working on projects designed by their supervisors, and their supervisors tend to demand full attention to the project and to view the general courses as distractions. So, as the form of the doctorate expands, students are often met with contradictory messages of timely completion and the importance of 'transferable skills' on the one hand and classical ideas of the doctorate as a continuous intellectual pursuit on the other.

Although the articles make evident that 'shaping student futures' is neither in the hands of the 'individual proactive student' nor is it completely determined by monolithic policies and forces; although there is a strong tendency to reform the university in a certain direction, it is a process full of contradiction and contestation. As reflected in this issue, contrary to the win-win speak of the reformers and policy-makers themselves, academics and students tend to regard the reforms with less optimism and as a threat to their autonomy. This special issue is written in the hope that understanding the reforms and their often contradictory effects might help students – individually or collectively – to shape their own futures.



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Notes

1. In fact, the welfare state (at least in its Nordic version) has helped to liberate the individual from dependency on primary groups, such as the family. However, when/if the welfare state retreats from responsibilities it may also mean that the individual is increasingly left to herself or himself without other collective support systems available.

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